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***The Global Land Grab, Primitive Accumulation and
Accumulation by Dispossession Revisited:
from conceptual tensions and debates to contradictions and
crisis tendencies***

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| Abstract

In an attempt to understand and explain the global land grab in terms of the dynamics and contemporary transformations of capitalism, critical scholars have made extensive use of the concepts of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession. Although they provide powerful insights into the phenomenon, their use is also fraught with challenges. In the absence of conceptual clarity, tensions and ambiguities over their meanings arise. There are also problematic assumptions embedded within them. The present study provides a critical review of this burgeoning conceptual debate. In so doing, it asks what can the analytical concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD give us that other concepts cannot. In search for answers, the notion of capitalism as a totality is revived. The study also questions the need for defining a generic concept of capitalism-facilitating accumulation, and offers instead a pluralistic view on capitalism to better appreciate its immense creative forces and varied ways of coming into being and expanding further across space and time.

Keywords: primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, land grabbing, capitalism, Marxist geography, totality

*Words:*16,953

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1 | Introduction

The past years have seen a significant resurgence of interest among critical scholars to extend Marx's understanding of 'primitive accumulation' in order to explain and understand incorporation of new spaces and social relations in the capital accumulation processes. The growing literature on the 'global land grab' is no different in this regard. The reignited interest in deploying the concept in contemporary contexts owes largely to David Harvey's efforts to extend its explanatory reach by showing how and why space matters to capitalism and vice versa (Glassman 2006). Despite his conceptual innovations to Marx's political economy has given rise to an array of intellectual achievements (Castree 2007), at issue here is what Harvey refers to as 'accumulation by dispossession' (hereafter referred to as 'ABD'). This adaptation of the concept of primitive accumulation provides a strong argument for understanding the imperatives and outcomes of dispossessionary responses to capitalist crises under conditions of neoliberal globalisation (Hall 2013).

Indeed, any attempt to situate land grabbing in the broader dynamics of capitalism will find primitive accumulation and ABD relevant to the analysis seeing as '[t]he processes by which land and other resources are enclosed, and their previous users dispossessed, for the purposes of capital accumulation are central to both' (Hall 2013: 1583). Having noted the similarities between present-day land acquisitions and the centuries-long process by which English peasants were expelled from the land and turned into wage-labourers to the requirement of wealth accumulation, many critical analysts have indeed made use of the above-mentioned two ideas to explain the current state of global affairs (e.g. Baird 2011; Moyo et al. 2012; Woldorf et al. 2013). Although the conditions in which the contemporary land rush is taking place are specific to our time, there is a historical dimension to state-capital alliances that one cannot ignore where new frontiers of land control challenge, transform, or obliterate previous ones to expand the productive base of capitalism (Peluso & Lund 2011). Enclosures in this sense have been an integral component of the development and spread of global capitalism across space and through time. For some, the phenomenon is accordingly best conceptualised as a continuous process of enclosure, under capital's drive to accumulate (e.g. Makki & Geisler 2011; Akram-Lodhi 2012).

With the advance of globalisation there has been a broader resurgence of interest in the expansion of capitalist production and market relations, thus debates over land grabbing, whether conceived

primarily as primitive accumulation, ABD, or neither, often intersect with those of related concepts such as commodification, privatisation, neoliberalisation and financialisation of the world economy (Hall 2012). In the context of ‘engaged research’, defined as research that ‘aims to have societal relevance and impact, to help interpret – and change – existing situations’ by Borras and Franco (2013: 1741), such concepts are useful for critical and transformative understanding of the phenomenon but only to a limited extent due to problems with conceptual clarity and overlap. For Levien (2012), the most important ambiguity shaping the various understandings and interpretations of primitive accumulation and ABD in land grab research and beyond arises out of definitional issues. In order, then, to provide analytical leverage on important questions, researchers must make a careful distinction between means-specific definitions and functional interpretations. ‘If “primitive accumulation” is to perform any theoretical heavy lifting in the analysis of contemporary land grabs, its conceptual intension (what it *means*) and descriptive extension (what it *covers*) need to be clarified’, as Ince (2014: 106) maintains. I argue, the same can be said about ABD.

The term ‘land grab’ itself appears in the literature in a variety of overlapping and often ill-defined ways, if taken at face value it ‘straightforwardly (and dramatically) conveys the idea of land being seized by force’ (Hall 2013: 1592). This common-sense take on land grabbing makes the term particularly tricky for it sits poorly with non-forceful acquisitions. Effectively, restricting our gaze and imagination. Geisler and Makki (2014: 29) find the term land grab hence to be ‘a misnomer, since the targeted resources extend beyond land to water bodies, subsurfaces minerals, wildlife habitats, genetic substances, carbon sequestration zones, and seascapes’. Viewed in this light, the land grab term ‘provides little more than a self-evident descriptive label for this phenomenon’, argues Levien (2012: 936). Although the term carries a lot of baggage and remains problematic, I find the generic and descriptive term land grabbing suitable with reference to the latest episode in global land relations. It is in this sense that the term land grabbing/ land rush is employed here. I do not, however, encourage its use to describe individual instances before inquiring into the underlying dynamics of land access, exclusion, and control, as later discussed.

In a context of neoliberal project of accumulation, the recent and ongoing crisis driven politico-economic turbulences has also prompted academia and the wider public sphere to revive discussions about the very nature of capitalism and its ways of relating to its outside environment (viz., society, living entities and the biophysical environment) notes Rossi (2012). He argues for a

substantive understanding of the variegation of capitalism,¹ with the intent to explain capitalism's enduring power even when faced with deep economic crisis and recession. The proposed pluralistically ontological perspective offers an inspiring point of departure for this study, allowing for greater appreciation of processes of subjectification, full of variety under capitalism. Inviting one thereby to question the different viewpoints on the relationship between capitalism and land grabbing. For now, suffice it to say that how we relate the global land rush to primitive accumulation and ABD depends on our prior definitions of capitalism, an issue that the land grab literature has not to my knowledge pursued. It should be noted that I do not seek to develop my own conception of capitalism, but rather to revive the notion of 'capitalism as a relentlessly expanding totality of social relations' (Rossi 2012: 349), in order to help us grapple with tensions and synergies between different schools of thought, a point to which I will later return.

More generally, the broader literature on the topic have been shaped by three set of concepts: a common-sensical understanding of land grab, the more nuanced definitions of academic variety and different readings of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession (Hall 2013). Although scholars, practitioners and activists clearly share some common ground, misconceptions as well as disagreements that go beyond terminology are widespread. Further, different actors with different aims and objectives involved in these discussions often frame the phenomena in relation to some well-known dichotomies about the efficiency and equity of land use, such as small versus large or domestic versus foreign, 'which can be easily mapped into 'good' – 'bad' scenarios' (Oya 2013a: 514). As a result, polarised debates about land grabbing, and its livelihood impacts in particular, prevail. That said, research on the phenomenon is evolving, revealing a more nuanced story. While unfolding the dynamics and contemporary transformations of capitalism has become increasingly central to our understanding of the global land grab, calls has been made for a greater contextual understanding of processes of differential accumulation and dispossession. The land grab research is thus in search for new theoretical frames and analytical tools.

The challenge remains to provide finely tuned and in-depth research, not to mention empirical details, into how the current processes of land grabbing and capitalist accumulation play out across space. This task, as Oya (2013b) suggests, is an opportunity for scholars working within a broadly Marxist political economy tradition to engage in the current debates and broaden our frame of

¹ Refers to a tendentially singular, global but variegated capitalism, marked by interdependencies, complementarities, contradictions and co-evolution. For fuller discussion, see Jessop (2014).

reference by stressing issues relating to agrarian transformations and processes of social differentiation. The question then arises whether these concepts now in circulation are adequate, and able to cope with theorising the processes of inclusions and exclusion at work. Attending to the geography of capitalism in general and the issue of land grabbing in particular entails asking what can the analytical concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD give us that other concepts cannot. As I argue in the conclusion, they give us capitalism itself, while concepts like enclosure and commodification highlight market expansion. It is in this spirit the paper revisits Marx's notion of primitive accumulation and Harvey's updating of the term under the expanded heading of ABD to review and discuss the role they play in relation to land grabbing and capitalist accumulation.

There has been a great deal of confusion and differences of opinion with regard to forms of accumulation and means of dispossession involved in land grabbing, to be sure. The aim of this paper is to provide insights into the conceptual difficulties that I have encountered in the literature. To this end, the use of primitive accumulation and ABD in emerging land grab research is outlined to identify key challenges and problems of imprecision, such as a failure to account for what 'is being brought 'inside capitalism, what is not, and how this happens' (Hall 2013: 1594) upon linking land grabbing to the creation, expansion and reproduction of capitalist social relations, or 'a persistence in seeing ABD as 'more of the same' – a wholesale agrarian transition whose significance rests in the generation of wage laborers' (Levien 2012: 939), to name but a few. This will hopefully promote further development of conceptual questions that can, in turn, bring greater complexity to the substantive and definitional discussions on land grabbing

1.1 Research objectives

This thesis is essentially concerned with addressing the conceptual debate on land grabbing for advancing knowledge and understanding of transformations that are constitutive of global capitalist development. Human geographers, myself included, influenced by Marx's writings and the diverse range of Marxian analysis that continues to be produced, have been interested in the ways in which capitalism both creates and necessitates uneven development. From this perspective then, while capitalism, as inherently unstable and prone to crisis, produces wealth it also deepens existing socio-spatial inequalities and creates new ones at multiple scale as the system continues to grow and change (Coe et al. 2007). This suggests that the nuances of capitalist expansion and its contradictions come together in all manner of expected and unexpected ways, as is arguably the case in renewed global interest in land and agricultural investments.

The ambition here is limited to discussion and critical analysis on the use of Marx's concept primitive accumulation together with Harvey's ABD thesis in order to appreciate their relevance for analysing the global land grab in the broader context of uneven development. While analysis of land grab has mobilised a variety of terms, many authors deploying primitive accumulation and ABD in their work have positively but insufficiently contributed to needed empirical and theoretical specification to the concepts (Hall 2013). Not only are the terms used in a variety of overlapping and often ambiguous ways, but they also contain potentially problematic assumptions about the nature and extent of the phenomenon that can skew empirical analysis. The overall aim of this thesis is therefore to advance the basic analysis of land grabbing in social research by bringing forth the tensions and challenges undermining the analytical power of these concepts in interpreting contemporary land grabs.

The design followed, takes a form of focused literature review. The objective is not to review an exhaustive list of relevant papers but rather to combine and synthesise to better appreciate the use of aforementioned concepts in the land grab research. I will survey both theoretical and empirical literature on contemporary land grabs to examine the extent to which these concepts, and assumptions embedded within, are found to reflect processes now unfolding. This begs the question as to what assumptions do we need to make when conceptualising land grabbing as primitive accumulation or accumulation by dispossession? Or, to put it rather differently, what do we risk missing out on explanation were we to conceptualise land grabbing as such?

1.2 Delimitations

For the purposes of this thesis, it is taken as given that land rush is indeed occurring. I also assume some background on the land rush itself. Although the issue at large merits attention only the complexities and controversies associated with land grab research itself is of interest for the present study. For there already exists a growing body of literature dealing with issues such as the scope and magnitude as well as the manifold drivers, mechanisms and implications of the phenomenon. Since a detailed description of in situ processes of land grab is beyond the scope of this thesis, I can only hope to clarify and expand the current research focus in terms of concepts employed, namely those of primitive accumulation and ABD. In the space available here, I can offer no more than a sketch of the current conceptual debate. While reviewing the literature exhaustively is not feasible, I have taken up prominent contributions to discuss the use of primitive accumulation and ABD to analyse land grabbing. Preference has been given to scholarly accounts offering some systematic

reflections (in both theoretical and empirical terms) on the conceptual apparatus informing the land grab research. This, of course, means that publications that are best characterised by loose or absent definitions of these concepts, albeit important in their own right to shedding light on the phenomenon, were excluded from my analysis.

1.3 Thesis outline

The thesis proceeds as follows: the following section introduces the burgeoning debate on land grabbing. Section three discusses the method and materials used addressing both methodological and practical considerations. The fourth section draws on Marxist geography to revive the understanding of capitalism as a totality, which, in turn, serves as the spur for rethinking of ontology. Section five then explores critically the conceptual devices that has been employed in analyses of land grabbing and global capitalist accumulation to show that the literature pays insufficient attention to challenges involved in their use. In so doing, it demonstrates the limits to interpreting land grabs as instances of primitive accumulation / ABD, and puts forward reflections on the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and development based on pluralistic understanding of capitalism itself. Section six concludes.

2 | Background

The broader literature on the topic varies greatly in terms of material reviewed, questions addressed, metrics and methods employed, claims made and the amount of research done to support these. Even though fast fact-finding missions and rapid assessment were appropriate and useful for addressing an initial set of basic questions (e.g., what, where, who, how much, how many?), this also gave rise to politics of evidence as competing perspectives emerged. As a result, we have come to view the phenomena broadly through the lens of dispossession on one hand and the win-win narrative on the other. This section offers a brief overview of some of the most contested definitional, conceptual, methodological and political issues found in the growing body of literature on land grabbing, as it is popularly called.

Although this rapidly unfolding phenomenon was first brought to light by media and NGO reports, academics and policy commentators joined the discussion with relative speed to grapple with basic questions relating to scale, drivers, and actors involved. This first wave or research on land

grabbing emerged in the immediate aftermath of 2007-2008 world food price spike and, accordingly, research efforts initially focused on issues of food security, land expropriation and displacement, social concerns and environmental impacts in host countries when linking the land rush to surging commodity prices. More specifically, the fresh interest of foreign capital in land and associated resources raised concerns over livelihood implications of agrarian populations due to ensuing changes in land use and property relations (GRAIN 2008; Cotula et al. 2009). The urgency to mobilise agricultural resources also revived a well-established modernisation mantra, that is, industrialisation of agriculture is necessary to economic progress, as perhaps best illustrated by the publication of the World Development Report 2008 (World Bank 2007), first of its kind in 25 years to give primacy to the agricultural sector. Global interest in farmland was accordingly to be harnessed for development (Deininger 2011). The underlying assumption being that ‘host countries have an opportunity to use investor interest to help them utilize the resources at their disposal in a way that can increase smallholder productivity and improve local livelihoods’ (World Bank 2011: 129).

This view contrasts sharply with the ongoing preoccupation of activists networks with the politically loaded phrase ‘land grabbing’. The term itself emerged from these early contributions as a catch-all phrase to refer to the explosion of ‘large-scale, cross-border land deals or transactions that are carried out by transnational corporations or initiated by foreign governments’ (Zoomers 2012: 429). It drew from familiar and iconic images from the past exploitative relations between the Global North and South to build resistance against a new series of enclosures and dispossession. This image has since been, as already implied, challenged ‘by those bent of recasting the phenomenon as a grand opportunity to further extend capitalist agro-industries in the name of pro-poor and ecologically sustainable development’ (Borras & Franco 2012: 35). ‘Large-scale land investment’ often is the preferred expression for those who view it in these positive terms.

2.1 The key issues and debates

The early discussion made sweeping conclusions based on what Oya (2013a: 505) calls ‘finding out fast’ or quick and dirty research’. As a result, unchecked data made its way into public domain and became a force to be reckoned with for science, policy and politics cannot be separated but mutually inform the others. Fact-building enterprises and the formation associated narratives is best understood ‘as a social and political process, whereby certain people, institutions and networks are enlisted’, argue Scoones et al. (2013: 476). The narratives created gain power almost independently

regardless of whether the ‘fact’ is true or not, thus influencing the way in which we frame the problem and suggest solutions. For instance, narratives of scarcity together with those of ‘idle’, ‘marginal’, ‘waste lands’ and the like may be deployed to justify investments in overseas land (See World Bank 2010). Further, such state-centric classifications of land use and property ‘have become key operational mechanisms through which land-use changes are facilitated’ (Borras & Franco 2012: 45) within recipient countries.

In the current, escalating debate on land grabs, numbers and definitions have indeed come to matter. In practice, two themes have been dominating the debate. First, has been the focus on land areas, and the number of hectares in particular. Reducing land grabbing to a quantitative problem, however, may lead scholarly and activists researchers to overlook, if not ignore altogether, other significant issues of scale, ‘such as the capital applied to the land, the control of supply chains, and the labour relations grounded or brought into being on those hectares’ (Edelman 2013: 488). By focusing the debate on land area affect the relative prominence given to questions relating to ownership, tenure and title, ‘and so creates a politics of measurement, legibility and control’ (Scoones et al. 2013: 477). The fascination with big numbers also encourages assumptions that the dispossessions, too, will be massive. A point taken up by Hall (2013: 1588) who suggests, little is known ‘about how many people are being dispossessed’ and, further, ‘it is much harder to know whether there has been (as is often argued) a surge of land-related dispossession in general’.

Another common way framing the debate is through dichotomous contrasts, such as ‘subsistence vs market-oriented’ and ‘food vs non-food’. In Oya’s (2013a: 515) view, organising conceptual and empirical framework around such dichotomies not only poses the risk of reproducing serious ideological biases but also speaks of ‘theoretical and conceptual poverty’ because reality is far ‘more complex and grey than these dichotomies suggest’. For example, in emphasising the role of foreign land grabbers at the expense of domestic actors attention is diverted away from ‘they way capital flows between overseas and domestic business and political interests’ (Scoones et al. 2013: 477). While failing to catch ‘the nuances of capitalist expansion and its contradictions’ land grab debates are stuck ‘to a simple world of ‘baddies’ (the ‘grabbers’), usually synonymous with large transnational agribusiness or sovereign funds, and ‘goodies’ (or ‘affected communities’, displaced smallholders and so on)’, further argues Oya (2013b: 1537).

Despite the global initiatives (namely by GRAIN and Land Matrix) to aggregate information on this fluid phenomenon, rigour, authority and reliability has been found wanting not only in the large datasets produced but also in the growing body of academic and non-academic literature that rely on them for ‘facts’. Oya (2013a: 506) brings into question the usefulness of these global dataset altogether for their dubious empirical grounding given how ‘sources and reports of unknown reliability are opportunistically combined ... and, as a result, these global numbers on land deals snowball, are recycled and circulate at great speed’. The broader problems of reliability and imprecision are not, however, easily overcome due to events unfolding at a rapid pace, high degrees of commercial secrecy involved, and the lack of standard criterion to classify and report land grabs as they take place. In a context of shaky datasets, oversimplified, inflated or sensational claims, debating land sizes and naming tenure will provide a rather partial view of what has occurred and what is occurring on the ground, to be sure (Edelman 2013; Scoones et al. 2013).

While activists networks in viewing research as a function of their advocacy and campaigning work selectively with particular issues and corresponding methodologies, Edelman et al. (2013: 1519) see this limiting their contribution ‘towards a fuller understanding of the causes, conditions, character, mechanisms, meanings, trajectories and implications of the new global land rush’. Rather than facilitating the negotiation between the different views and interests, the fixation on ‘the killer fact’ – ‘the number that sways the debate, gains the media profile and is in the top line of the press release, as Scoones et al. (2013: 473) calls it, stands also in the way of a broader critical discussion for we are essentially yet to agree on what is being counted. Calls for more nuanced, in-depth grounded research to address the expressed methodological and conceptual concerns, and thereby to better support claims made and scenarios depicted are indeed well justified. This of course necessitates a move beyond descriptive ‘what, where and who’ questions, in order to critically analyse the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of these patterns (White et al. 2012).

2.2 Evolving conceptualisations, dimensions and research agendas

While it was recognised that heightened interest in farmland comes also with risks attached (including, but not limited to, corruption, shady deals, dispossession and displacement, unfulfilled promises for employment, and the like) these were to be kept in check by appropriate regulation (White et al. 2012). In seeking, then, to create the possibility of win-win scenarios stemming from yield gaps, land availability and investor interest, the main international agencies working with food

and agriculture² put forth a set of principles for responsible agricultural investment that respects rights, livelihoods, and resources. Akram-Lodhi (2012: 137) notes, however, the voluntary code of conduct ‘narrows a complex issue, rendering as merely technical points ... a raft of deep-seated social injustices and economic inequalities’ as a means to legitimise contemporary land deals and, by extension, agro-industries for development. De Schutter (2011: 250) arrives similarly at quite different conclusion regarding land investments and the ‘responsibility’ of the principles in question. The most pressing issue ‘is not how much, but how’, he argues, ‘what we need is not to regulate land grabbing as if this were inevitable, but to put forward an alternative programme for agricultural investment’.

De Schutter (2011: 250) goes on to suggest that the difficult relationship between small-scale farmers and attempts to integrate them into the larger economy is set for a whole new chapter with the arrival of the new land rush, for the prospect of outside investment amounts to ‘a powerful incentive towards the development of a market for land rights as a means to improve security of tenure, and the ease with which rights over land can change hands’. Arguments for land markets are based on a capitalised view of agriculture that links formal land title to productivity. That is, with titles, the rural poor ‘can become subjects to credit, expand and intensify their operations and generate new income flows’ but they can also be exposed to ‘the risks of indebtedness and, in the worst of cases, foreclosure and proletarianization’ (Edelman 2013: 495-6). Further, not all actors are equally equipped to take advantage of clear property titles. In many cases enclaves of privileges may arise when the abandonment of collective forms of tenure in favour of free land markets brings in outside investors and a shift towards more export-oriented agriculture. Structural inequalities, even in the presence of formal land rights, may lead to pre-emptive land grabs by powerful interests looking to make speculative gains through the rising value of landed property, concludes De Schutter (2011).

In a globalising world of long-distance absentee landowners, the redistribution of land is arguably no longer ‘a local questions of social justice (land for those who work it) or efficiency (land for the most efficient producer)’ (Zoomers 2010: 441). Moreover, the rush to land now takes place less exclusively in an agricultural-rural context: land acquisitions are also intended, inter alia, for nature

² These principles, often referred to as the ‘RAI (responsible agricultural investment) Principles’ was proposed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United (FAO), the international Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and the World Bank Group (see, World Bank et al. 2010).

reserves, ecotourism and hideaways, or for creation of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and urban extensions. The spatial complexities, extent and intensity of the contemporary land rush thus means that a conceptual update is in needed, argues Zoomers. She therefore proposes that rather than focusing on in situ processes of land grabbing, the focus should instead be on globalisation and the ‘foreignisation’ of space or land when theorising the nature and implications of land grabbing for sustainable and equitable development.

This controversial and politically sensitive dimension of global land rush is fraught with contradictions, notes Borras et al. (2012a). For example, recent accumulation and foreignisation of land is not acceptable, whereas foreignisation of capital and investments that predate the new land rush, yet indirectly captures land and land-based resources, is welcomed. The relationship between land grabbing and foreignisation is further problematised in Borras et al. (2012b: 407), who point out that large-scale capital does not necessarily assume a ‘foreign’ face, thus defend the need to clarify ‘the areas of overlap between, and the lines that differentiate’ land grabbing and foreignisation of landed property. A key aspect here is that, capital, regardless of origin and destination, is interested in gaining control over land in order to change the meaning or use of land and associated resources. It is thus argued that more elaborate discussion and explanation on the agrarian change processes and social dynamics in the context of land grabbing are conceivable by reintroducing the broader question of land concentration, and by locating scholarly inquiry into this phenomena more firmly within broader discussion of neoliberal globalisation (Borras et al. 2012b).

In a similar vein, Sassen (2010: 23) situates land grabbing in the wider context of ‘the transformative processes that expand the base of current advanced capitalism’. To this end, systematic repositioning of territory in the global South is unfolding as sites for ‘needed’ resources rather than as nations’ space. Put differently, new areas of the globe are being pried open to the capitalist market, thereby overriding any remaining pretenses of national development. That said, she stresses the need to go beyond logics of extraction to recognise the much larger financial deepening of economies that turns space back to territory through forced expulsion and exclusion of growing numbers of people. The larger history in the making builds upon a wide range of developments since the post-1980 era including the opening of markets combined with ‘an imposed debt and debt servicing regime which took priority over all other state expenditures’ (Sassen 2010: 45). Under the circumstances of neoliberal economic restructuring and the associated expansion of market relations, rural economies and agrarian livelihoods across the globe were largely left

insecure and vulnerable. This historical juncture has opened up opportunities for land grabbing, concur White et al. (2012: 627), and go on to suggest that land grabbing may be therefore seen ‘as an outcome of the inter-relating processes of privatization and financialization’.

McMichael (2012: 688), for example, in trying to understand land grabbing in relation to the rising influence of financial markets in economic activity, situates land grabbing within the so-called triple crisis of finance, food and energy, ‘a conjuncture in which investors prefer to hold capital in liquid (rather than illiquid/asset) forms’. Land was back on the agenda, to be sure, ‘but this time as a speculative venture and hedge against food and fuel supply shortfalls’, argues McMichael (2012: 685). For whom this realignment of interest in agricultural sector as a source of employment, growth and revenue can be understood in terms of changing conditions of accumulation. Further, land grab as an expression of corporate food regime restructuring signals a ‘spatial fix’ whose benefits are likely to prove short-lived. These developments are therefore to be read as symptomatic of a fundamental accumulation crisis of the neoliberal project. For McMichael, it does not appear that agricultural investments can resolve the general crisis of capital accumulation, and indeed that of poverty alleviation and development, for ‘capital is ill-disposed to translate its financial power into new productive forms of investment other than speculative acquisitions’ (2012: 682). At its most extreme this can mean that the land has become more valuable to the global market than the people on it (Sassen 2010).

2.3 Land grabbing and response to crisis

Today there are more literature to challenge many problematic framing assumptions of the early discussion, and to move towards more balanced perspectives. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* (June 2013) brought together researchers with a newer set of questions. The aim was to go beyond identifying the key challenges, some of which are presented above, and pave the way for future research by taking stock of what has been done so far. This background section builds largely upon articles from this issue, ‘which examine broad trends and conceptual questions and seek deepen and profoundly alter prevailing theoretical assumptions’ (Edelman et al. 2013: 1520) in discussing the impetus behind the new research agenda proposed. In addition, contributions to special issue on land grabs in *Third World Quarterly* (November 2013) were frequently used here to stress the complexity of the phenomenon and the contradictions it raises. More generally, framing land grabbing as a response to multiple crises (namely food, fuel, climate and finance) is now becoming

a ‘common thread’ in the emerging broader literature (Hall 2013: 1587), implying a rather unified research agenda for mapping the dynamics of dispossession and accumulation that follows.

The crisis arguments appear often intimately associated with the multiple crises that intersected around 2006-2008, suggesting thereby land grab as deriving from global forces. As tempting as it is to treat the global land grab ‘as a top-down phenomenon driven by global markets and foreign states’ (Fairbairn 2013: 335), scholars from different backgrounds are working towards locating ‘something analytically richer and more nuanced than media stories about faceless “winners and losers”’ (Geisler & Makki 2014: 29), as discussed above. The view that ‘there is no one grand land grab, but a series of changing contexts, emergent process and forces, and contestations’, Peluso and Lund (2011: 669) put forth, is gaining wider acceptance. Such an approach seems consistent with the findings of Borras et al. (2012a: 847), for whom the land grabs in Latin America and the Caribbean ‘occur within the same logic and processes of global capitalist development that underpinned land grabs elsewhere’, albeit ‘it has taken different forms and character – and trajectories – in this region’. Although the land rush is said to be caused ultimately by the increase in foreign demand for land, the mediating role played by the host states and domestic power dynamics is increasingly of interest for scholars. Fairbairn (2013: 351), for example, working on the case of Mozambique underlines ‘the importance of domestic institutions and actors in shaping the land acquisition process’.

In brief, where the early discussion was concerned with social, economic and environmental outcomes, it has now been pointed out that impacts can only be made known in relation to pre-land grab situation, namely, through broader temporal frames and contextual understanding. In other words, there is a need to ‘disentangle the immediate and the more fundamental dynamics at work’ (White et al. 2012: 620). Edelman et al. (2013: 1521), among others, highlight the importance of historical analytical framework when discussing peasant dispossession, ‘it is essential to restore a sense of the agency of contending social classes, as well as an appreciation of how historical contingencies may affect agrarian outcomes’. The dynamics of agrarian change and those of global capital accumulation has been accordingly suggested as fruitful analytical points of departure. This greater appreciation of the historical moves towards enclosure and emergent rural capitalism has brought Marx’s critical political economy at the heart of the discussion. In attempting to connect the long-standing theme of agrarian transformation to new conditions and scenarios, many

commentators has found Harvey's ABD, as opposed to Marx's theory of primitive accumulation, a more suitable analytic concept, though.

This is because in the current state of capitalist development land grabbing as a form of accumulation is not on all occasions understood as original, primitive or previous to capitalism, but instead as 'intimately tied to the classical political economy notion of capitalist expansion through commodification, juridical individualism and alienation' (Woldorf et al. 2013: 197). What is new is not land grabbing and private ownership *per se* but rather 'new crops with new labor processes and objectives for the growers, new actors and subjects, and new legal and practical instruments for possessing, expropriating, or challenging previous land controls' (Peluso & Lund 2011: 668). Yet, the incorporation of smallholder producers in new social relations and patterns of accumulation in the context of global land grab, is suggestive for many of the continuing importance of primitive accumulation to capitalism. As a result, the major forces driving or impeding agrarian transitions are once again debated.

3 | Material & Method

3.1 The role of literature review in research

Before I am to consider literature review as a methodology in its own right, it is useful to establish how literature review more commonly features in the process of research. In a quantitative study, one would make use of the existing literature on a topic in question to derive hypotheses from it and subject them to empirical testing. Qualitative research, on the other hand, draws upon existing literature for insights and information that serve as context knowledge when applied or discussed in relation to one's own work (Flick 2009: 49). In this regard, reviewing existing literature is part of the ground-clearing and preparatory work of any empirical research. However, as research projects often proceed in an iterative manner, that is, moving back and forth between 'basic purposes, issues, aims, etc., and methodology, research strategies, choice of data, and analysis' (Mikkelsen 2005: 150), the search for and reading of relevant literature should be regarded as an integral part of the research process to accommodate for changes in focus that may follow.

As a rule, any good literature review would provide some critical elements for the research proper, and put to test a number of key areas. All important generic areas that should be covered in this

respect include: methodological traditions or controversies, theoretical approaches and debates, key concepts and information on the area and the issue of interest in particular (Hart 1998: 27). In brief, writing up a competent literature review entails more than a mere summary and description of theories and opinions of others. Instead, the review should amount to a coherent argument based on interpretation, viz. analysis of points already made (Desai & Potter 2006: 215). Furthermore, striking a balance between context-specific materials (e.g. data collected) and theoretical or thematic literature is of importance to all research for establishing a meaningful dialogue between ideas and evidence. Reviewing the existing literature remains a relevant and ongoing component in a research project therefore for not only developing an argument and making clear the underlying links to the wider debate but also for showing that one's findings advances knowledge on the topic by going beyond or contradicting existing research (Flick 2009: 53).

3.2 Literature based research methodology

To the extent most methods textbooks cover literature review methodologies at all, the coverage is delimited 'to provide guidance for students on how to get started on their research project' (Bryman 2008: 81). Apart from describing the available approaches, which often include systematic review, narrative review and meta-analysis, very little, if any, is said about literature review as a research strategy. Likewise, the information imparted by these materials poorly provides more general guidance on what a non-empirical research can be and how it can be organised. Yet, a review of the literature and existing studies can become a research project in its own right, regardless of the lack of clear-cut prescriptions about how to conduct a literature based study. To put it somewhat differently, one can opt for textual analysis as a stand-alone method (Flick 2009: 255). The adoption of documentary analysis, of course, should be based on careful consideration of the research questions and what sort of answers are to be pursued. Achieving good question-method fit is a worthy goal in itself, but it also serves towards satisfying 'a central criterion in the validity of research' (Punch 2005: 20).

For an undergraduate student embarking first time on complex area of research activity, the lack of clear directions is inconvenient to say the least. Although this puts to the test one's ability to integrate and evaluate ideas, it also provides the opportunity to adopt an imaginative approach to research. As Hakim (2000: 22) notes, no single unified approach to literature reviews means they can vary greatly in terms of emphasis, style and presentation. That said, all literature reviews are dealing with information gathered from published materials relevant to one's topic. Rather than

coming from research instruments such as observations or questionnaires, the data for analysis is composed of interpretations, understandings and arguments that others have put forth. Generally speaking, then, the types of analysis ‘relevant to literature reviewing are those which systematically extract key ideas, theories, concepts and methodological assumptions from the literature’ (Hart 1998: 110). Whereupon an analytical evaluation of the research on one’s topic is the expected end product of a literature review, as discussed above.

3.3 Reading to review

Before weighing up the contribution that particular ideas, positions and approaches have made to the topic specific literature, it is worth noting that the analysis itself ‘is about reading the literature *selectively* but also about reading it *critically*’ (Desai & Potter 2006: 214). The best advice thus offered is to be pragmatic – ‘to include everything that has been written on your subject...is probably a foolish aim’ (Flowerdew & Martin 2006: 56). Besides, an undergraduate research project can only go so far in terms of scope, breadth and depth of the literature search. The next task is to move beyond viewing the selected documents as mere ‘containers of contents’ (Flick 2009: 261). This means the student needs to situate and position herself not only as a reader but also as a researcher and writer, to be aware of how values enter the research process. To put it differently, ‘the social researcher is never conducting investigation in a moral vacuum’ (Bryman 2008: 130). Correspondingly, documents of any kind should be seen as a means for communication, that is, they ‘represent specific versions of realities constructed for specific purposes’ (Flick 2009: 259). Thus, there is no escaping the fact that all forms of knowledge are positioned and situated.

Adopting a questioning and critical attitude while reading is not enough alone to tease out the main ideas from texts under consideration without sufficient openness of mind to appreciate a variety of worldviews. As Hart (1998: 11) puts it: ‘The different intellectual traditions need to be appreciated for what they are not for what they are assumed to lack from another standpoint’. It is the willingness to explore different perspectives in the spirit of research that can add value to existing work by ‘presenting it in a new light’ (Desai & Potter 2006: 215). This requires one to see where ideas can lead when applied without making prior assumptions. To map out the ways land grabbing has been investigated, including the general approaches, usual methods and attendant assumptions, is to unravel the reasoning that informs the research and arguments found in the literature (Hart 1998: 142). Findings, themes and conclusions can be challenged only when the ways in which core ideas and concepts have been employed in argument, or operationalised for empirical work, have

been properly outlined. This is where I find the opportunity to contribute; to map out new avenues for further research by questioning the conceptual apparatus currently in use.

3.4 The research objective revisited

With this in mind, I have set out to do a research project in the form of focused literature review. The broader aim is to discuss and analyse the use of the concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD in the land-grab literature. As discussed by Mikkelsen (2005: 158), '[c]oncepts contain built-in assumptions, statements about the nature of things that are not observable or testable. We accept them as a necessary starting point'. Implementing familiar concepts without subjecting them to scrutiny may impose limitations to theoretical and empirical understandings of the key dynamics and forces at play in expropriation of land and natural resources. In view of this, the key guiding research questions to be addressed by the review is: what assumptions do we need to make in order to conceptualise land grabbing as primitive accumulation / ABD? Insofar as this is paper of critiques, it is worth noting that I am first and foremost interested in the relative merits of the concepts in interpreting the land grab, rather than engaging in debates about their history and how particular authors are to be read. Further, I do not necessarily rely on the major theorists for definitions but make use of ones frequently encountered in discussions around land grabbing.

From a practical point of view, decisions have had to be made from the beginning about the coverage of the review. Reflecting language constraints, only material available in English is included. This of course means that potentially relevant papers may be missed. The choice of texts to include, depends primarily on the review question (and theoretical consideration, discussed later). The literature I was mainly interested in has advanced beyond the 'making sense' phase of research. The focus is therefore on materials published roughly around 2012, that stand in contrast to literature belonging to the earlier discussion in terms of depth and methodological care involved. To put it differently, I gave preference to contributions that have made the effort to frame the land grab phenomenon historically and conceptually. Although electronic databases are not the only source of literature to consider, they are made of extensive use for purposes of convenience. That is not to say, however, that visits to libraries are made redundant.

To address the issues of subjective assessments and partial or selective coverage that research reviews are liable to, in Hakim's view (2000: 23), as they 'veer towards the 'essay' style', some practices associated with systematic review are adopted to control against such biases. The literature

search was done with the help of specific key words, namely primitive accumulation and ABD together with different formulations of 'land grab'. This was complemented with convenience sampling when appropriate. Literature review as a methodology treats the literature itself as the population, and since very recent publications are focused upon, it was easier, at times, to use snowball sampling (Bryman 2008: 183-4) of literature sort to access further data of relevance. That is to say, I added to my sources by looking at the reference lists in articles.

4 | Theoretical and conceptual intervention

In a context of state-backed expansion of markets, the tools of Marxist theory has once again been employed and both primitive accumulation and Harvey's ABD have become frequently used concepts in efforts to understand the global land grab in relation to the imperatives of capitalist development. If the present can only be understood in terms of the past as classical Marxism maintains (Flowerdew & Martin 2006: 23), tracing the causes and consequences of land grabbing means, in a sense, tracing the causes and consequences of capitalist development. This is not to say, however, that the specific ways in which the system's spatial horizons are expanded is to be predicted but to stress the importance of identifying the logics of the system at work pushing forward new rounds of spatial restructuring and social differentiation. In other words, it is crucial to distinguish between 'the identification of a 'tendency towards' and 'inevitability of' something happening' (Coe et al. 2007: 66).

Further, any inquiry into the relationship between global land grab, primitive accumulation and ABD in the context of capitalist development requires a clear definition of capitalism itself to begin with, because it does not readily equate to enclosure, commodification or the market, for instance. There is also the need to go beyond these definitions to explain why capitalism matters, maintains Hall (2012). It becomes therefore necessary to distinct between capitalism's 'inside' and 'outside' before making claims about the implications of specifically capitalist social relations in any given space and time. Here assumptions about actors and preferences influence the way in which people, land, ideas and the like are taken to move from inside to the outside of capitalism. The possibility that direct producers might want, for example, to 'self-dispossess' by selling land is overlooked, upon ascribing agency to global capital and stressing the role of the state as the handmaiden to the markets (Hall 2012: 1198). Tensions over boundaries of capitalism and the complexities of actor

motivation need to be better appreciated in the analysis of land grabbing not only to make effective use of the key concepts but also to avoid misrepresenting contemporary agrarian transformations.

In order, then, to explain and understand land grabbing in terms of the specificity and dynamics of capitalism and to overcome problems of imprecision that trouble the use of concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD in this regard, following Jameson (2010: 5-6), I propose reviving the understanding of ‘capitalism as a totality’. In dealing with dilemmas of representation, Jameson seeks to capture ‘a totality which is not only non-empirical as a system of relationships, but which is also in full movement, in expansion, in a movement of totalization which is essential to its very existence and at the heart of its peculiar economic nature’. Thus to understand the global land grab one must try to understand capitalism as a system of compulsion that periodically adapts and refines its mode of functioning to remain in existence under changing conditions of accumulation.

More generally, I argue that a good starting point for unravelling the relationship between capitalist development and the global land grab is reflecting on the different ways in which ‘capital engages with what lies outside of its own sphere of existence and influence ... in order to reinforce its hegemonic rule in the contemporary world’ (Rossi 2012: 351). In making the argument for pluralistically substantive understanding of capitalism itself, and its exercise in the land grab research, the remainder of the section will outline an intellectual framework suitable for this purpose. To this end, a tripartite ontological configuration of capitalism, based on Rossi (2012), is put forth to illustrate capitalism’s different natures of being and of relating to its outside environment, namely societies and other living entities and the biophysical environment. But first I will reidentify Jameson’s (2010) notion of totality with that of Marxist tradition in geography to elaborate a historically grounded understanding of capitalist development as a socio-*spatial* process, one which leaves a pattern of distinct places and uneven spaces behind.

4.1 Marxian approaches: conceptualising uneven development

To be more specific, upon reflecting on the unevenness of wealth and development across space and through time, I draw here upon the Marxist geography, or what Harvey has referred to as historical geographical materialism (HGM). This approach is ‘committed to applying classical Marxism to a redefinition and understanding of human geography; a redefinition of the classic interest in place and space, differentiation and connection into themes of geographically uneven development, colonialism, and territorial struggle, among others’ (Cox 2005: 2). It provides (human) geographers

with a framework for understanding and explaining socio-spatial inequities engendered by capitalist development, one in which uneven development is not only seen as ‘an inevitable feature of capitalism, but also a *necessary one*’ (Coe et al. 2007: 66).

At issue here is the creation of value in the labour processes and the developmental imbalances this gives rise to. But how is value actually created? While wealth is ‘a cumulative share of the rewards created in the economic process of adding *value*’, value measured as ‘the monetary worth of a good or service traded in the market economy’ (Coe et al. 2007: 64) requires *people* to engage in labour processes to create such a good or service. Beyond the obvious manufacturing this applies to all forms of economic activity. The manner in which the created rewards are shared across space, shapes the geographical pattern of development brought about a given economic activity. Thus, the spatial organisation of economic activities, and perhaps more importantly, ‘which parts of their spatially dispersed operations will be allocated the most value’ (Coe et al. 2007: 64), tells us more about the unevenness of economic development than the operational location of a company alone. Suffice it to say, most of the financial gains from production are allocated between places of *consumption*, not production (see, Harvey 2006).

The centrality of class in HGM is rooted in Marxist understanding of the process through which wealth is generated. As elaborated by Woods and Roberts (2011: 101), the working class (the *proletariat* in Marxist terms) ‘dispossessed of the means to subsists has only its own labour to sell; and labour for Marx, was the energy that makes the wheels of capitalism turn’. In essence, capital as accumulated wealth is produced *in and through others* by separating the immediate producers from the means of production and transforming them into wage labourers, a process known as primitive accumulation in the Marxists tradition. Capital thereby becomes a necessary condition for the reproduction of the immediate producer. Rather than treating class as a distributional category, the distinction between classes is made based on how they are positioned in relation to the means of production. In other words, capitalism is essentially founded on a class relation between capital and labour that takes the form of exploitation. Moreover, as long as ‘the dependence of immediate producer on capitalist is reproduced, exploitation can continue’ (Cox 2005: 11).

Capitalism as a profit-driven system needs to grow continually to accumulate even more wealth, and as such is prone to crisis and instability. Further, the system as a whole is driven by what is termed a *crisis of over-accumulation*. In short, ‘[w]orkers are always producing more for the

capitalist than they earn, so the aggregate demand can never keep pace with the growing supply of products' (Coe et al. 2007: 69). To restore the conditions for profitability the capitalist system is compelled to look outward as well as to restructure internally. As Castree (2009: 50) explains, 'Surpluses in search of further surpluses impel capitalism' to engage in 'territorially specific investments in a variety of new places, or the remaking of existing production complexes whose combined activities are no longer profitable'. In practice this often entails replacing living labour with machinery or relocating production to low of cost geographies. In addition to spatial fixes capitalism as a system of production may resort to 'temporal fix' or 'temporal displacement', that is, shifting resources out of immediate production to ensure the future needs of accumulation. As a result, the capitalist system is in a constant state of flux, 'always finding new spaces to develop or old spaces to redevelop' (Coe et al. 2007: 75).

This, then, is the logic of contemporary land deals, according to Akram-Lodhi (2012: 135) for whom, 'it is an effort to create a change in the character of accumulation, both in agriculture and beyond' to continue growing and avert crisis once again. 'But capital accumulation is not only about the production and circulation of surpluses as surplus values. It is also about the appropriation of the assets of others', argues Harvey (2006: 95). The process, 'through which collective resources are appropriated by private interests' and 'transferred from local communities to global traders who concentrate their corporate wealth elsewhere' (Coe et al. 2007: 83), has been described as ABD.³ The active involvement of state and financial intermediaries in opening up farmland for productive investment and, by extension, to financial investment and speculation has led many observers to adopt Harvey's approach and question the extent to which the land grab phenomenon represents anything but capitalism's strategies of survival. The current crisis of capital accumulation, involving the conjunction of food, energy, climate and finance, has accordingly remained, as Edelman et al. (2013: 1518) notes, 'a key analytical point of departure for most observers and the sole for some'.

The fact that capitalism needs space in order to function 'but perpetually strives to reconstitute it means that ultimately someone, somewhere must bear the brunt of over-accumulation and capital devaluation', notes Castree (2009: 51). In answering the broader questions as to who suffers, where and how they choose to respond, land grab researchers have focused on the terms under which people and places are incorporated into the global circulation of value. The view of HGM is that

³ Dispossession occurs in a variety of ways, argues Harvey (2006: 52), for whom it is essentially 'fragmented and particular – a privatization here, an environmental degradation there, a financial crisis of indebtedness somewhere else'. The state then has a crucial role in backing and promoting these processes.

capital ‘has to reproduce an industrial reserve army if it is to reproduce itself as a class relation’ (Cox 2005: 14). On the account of the system’s characteristics, this implies that the capitalist social relations of production are to be established and intensified to restore the conditions of profitability. As today’s global land grab unfolds, the question then arises by what means does capitalism as a mode of production and social formation come into being and expand further in a variety of socio-spatial configurations. In search for answers, the notion of capitalism as a totalising system is next revisited.

4.2 Capitalism as a totality

Capitalism as the dominant form that structures contemporary economies has its own logic, according to which economic and social conditions are continually transformed. In Marxist approaches to economic processes everything starts with production and returns to it. Moreover, ‘it is the transformations in modes of production which are the key to understanding all other aspects of social change’ (Flowerdew & Martin 2005: 23). The relations of production in their totality constitute the economic structure of society, the basis of the social order, that defines modern capitalism. In seeking to understand capitalism as a totality, one must then look beyond the present state of the economy to include not only its historical and geographical background but also the social and cultural ways of life created and dismantled. But how do we construct a totality ‘out of individual elements, historical processes, and perspectives of all kinds’ (Jameson 2010: 5)?

To establish how everyday economic processes fit into this unique and peculiar totality called capitalism calls for abstract thinking. ‘This requires imagining *structures* that shape our economic lives, but which are not necessarily detectable in everyday experiences’ (Coe et al. 2007: 65). Indeed, as Cox (2005: 17) elaborates, we experience the world as ‘fragmented, broken into different things, relations, processes’, which come together by chance. Despite this seeming fragmentation of social life, ‘social coherence *is* asserted, a form of social discipline or order enforced’ (Cox 2005: 17), one which does not go unchallenged but is always reconstructed so accumulation can once again proceed. At the center of this process is, of course, production. As discussed above, conflict, tension and contradictions arise out of the fundamental logic or urge for growth as ‘the necessity to produce takes the form of the necessity to accumulate’ (Cox 2013: 10) under capitalism. What we thus have, is a system that is simultaneously exploitative, contested, dynamic and creative.

Contradictions resulting in recurring crises ‘have historically functioned as turning points in the evolution (the management, organization, and restructuring) of capitalist economies and societies’ (Rossi 2012:348). Spaces and places of global capitalism are always, in effect, in a process of becoming, dissolving and being recreated. The totalising behaviour of capitalism derives from its need to ‘differentiates itself, not least geographically, in order to solve its contradictions’, as Cox (2013: 15) explains, ‘but this results in re-posing them in a new concrete form’. Whether novel regimes of accumulation and politico-economic regulation follows from the most recent crises and economic recession is yet uncertain, but even so there has been a renewed interest in gaining substantive understanding of capitalism itself, not only the dominant mode of regulation (neoliberalism). The current forms of the capitalist mode of production and accumulation have been mostly interpreted within distinct disciplinary boundaries, however, to better appreciate the system’s varying ways of relating to its outside environment engaging with theoretical pluralism is in order, argues Rossi (2012). An argument that I will elaborate below.

4.3 On the varying ontologies of capitalism

Capitalism for Rossi, as ‘an incomplete social formation ... acts as a constantly expanding and socializing entity, particularly under conditions of globalization’ (2012: 349). However, he argues, we lack understanding of capitalism as such, for the past three decades the discussions and debates of capitalism as a mode of production and social formation have been confined to different schools of thought that rarely communicated with each other. Building on Jameson’s (2010) notion of totality, Rossi attempts to incorporate seemingly incompatible modes of thought to explore ‘the variegated, at the same time mutually contradictory and interrelated, relational ontologies of contemporary capitalism’ (2012: 349). Based on the qualitative properties of this multifaceted totality, he terms the ontologies as ‘purely relational’, ‘sovereignty-based’ and ‘dualistic’, when ontology is understood in its literal sense dealing with capitalism’s varying natures of being. In terms of doing research and thinking, this implies embracing theoretical pluralism to shed light on processes of subjectification that accompanies capitalist accumulation and development.

In order to expand or regenerate itself, the capitalist system may relate horizontally, vertically or through inversion to its outside environment. The purely relational ontology refers to capitalism’s assumed ability to connect horizontally to existing social processes and economic formations. In this sense, relation is understood ‘as a form of exchange and dialogue among ostensibly equal subjects’ (Rossi 2012: 351). Whereas, the sovereignty-based ontology associated with capitalism,

reveals a vertical relationality. That is, a relation ‘within an explicit dynamic of domination’ allowing capitalism to ‘act as a sovereign and colonizing force within the existing politico-economic order at multiple geographical scales’ (Rossi 2012: 351). The third, dualistic ontology, somewhat overlaps with that of purely relational ontology in that it is based on ‘positions of autonomy and alterity, which nurtures its processes of invention and emphasizes the importance of capital-life relation’ (Rossi 2012: 351). The notion of inversion put forth in this regard suggests a process of internalisation of capital’s outside environment, a cultural change of sorts, that fuels the constant evolution and transformation of capitalism from within.

Rossi takes his argument further in identifying a specific ‘ontological dispositif’ for each of these above-mentioned ontologies, which he sees as instrumental in capitalism’s process of subjectification. By ontological dispositif he refers to ‘the complex set of sociocultural and institutional relations associated with specific economic-spatial settings and sociopolitical conditions, which allow the process of capitalist accumulation to come into being and expand further’ (Rossi 2012: 350). These different dispositifs – *embeddedness*, *dispossession* and *subsumption* – are also taken to account for capitalism’s enduring power even under the most adverse conditions. The category of embeddedness, associated with the purely relational ontology, gives emphasis to connections, fluidity and mobile networks. More generally, attention is paid to ‘spatial proximity and face-to-face interaction in economic development’ (Rossi 2012: 354). The dispositif of dispossession, on the other hand, draws from Harvey’s conceptualisation of the dynamics of neoliberalism with special reference to capital’s strategies of survival and self-defence during economic downturns. Exploring the economic logics of primitive accumulation, the notion of ABD reveals the colonising logics underpinning the spatial expansion of capitalism across the globe. In this sense, ‘capitalism deploys a sovereignty-based ontology predicated on acts of domination to enable the process of accumulation’ (Rossi 2012: 358).

Unlike the previous ontological dispositifs of embeddedness and dispossession, the last category subsumption builds around a relatively overlooked understanding of capitalist accumulation that rely on the real subsumption of life itself, a process of incorporation of forms of life standing outside capital. In this perspective, capitalism is associated with the dualistic ontology based on positions of autonomy and alterity that overlap and shape one another. Put differently, the production of social life ‘is transforming the very nature of capitalism through the incorporation of knowledges, emotions, affects and linguistic qualities within the capitalist process of production

and socialization' (Rossi 2012: 358). While the empirical application of this strand of thinking to the understanding of capitalism has been more limited, it nevertheless provides valuable insights into the level of complexity in relations between capitalism and the natural and man-made environment.

While having no pretensions to capture in detail the tremendous varieties of actually existing capitalism, this tripartite ontological configuration nevertheless enables a fuller understanding of capitalism's co-existing modes of being and relating in the globalising world. In drawing from emerging intellectual strands, namely those of neo-institutionalism, neo-Marxism and post-Marxism, Rossi's ontological reconfigurations allows us to transcend the unidimensional understanding of the reality and, by extension, of capitalism itself. The systemic logics of uneven development under capitalism can accordingly be explored in a dialectical and pluralistic fashion. The pluralistically substantive interpretation offered, is readier to accept difference and the overall heterogeneity of capitalism without losing sight of capitalism's totality. I suggest, any attempt to explore the unity *and* heterogeneity of capitalism in general and those of processes of land grabbing in particular, could benefit from such an understanding.

5 | Discussion

The relationship between contemporary land grabs and agrarian transition to capitalism has now become a subject of great scholarly interest and a matter of debate. Whether understood primarily as new enclosures (Makki & Geisler 2011), ongoing primitive accumulation (Moyo et al. 2012), development by dispossession (Makki 2013), accumulation by agricultural dispossession (Magdoff 2013) or accumulation by dispossession (Woldorf et al. 2013), the phenomenon is essentially framed in relation to creation, expansion and reproduction of capitalist social relations, or simply as displacement to open space for agro-industrial interests and financial capital to exploit the land. In drawing on political economy and Marxist traditions, two key concepts employed to understand and explain the global land grab in terms of the dynamics and crisis tendencies of capitalism and its contemporary transformations are Marx's primitive accumulation alongside Harvey's updated and revised version of it as ABD. While favored by many working on land grabbing today to produce theoretically informed accounts of the phenomenon, there are however challenges involved in using them that call for greater attention.

Broadly speaking, there are differences of opinion on their relationship to the expansion of capitalist production and, by extension, to land grabbing, as well as on their interrelationships. To be sure, some authors treat the two as interchangeable, while some differentiate strongly between them. Another common approach subscribes to an understanding of coercive, extra-economic processes to be part of primitive accumulation and ABD, in which case exploitation and capital accumulation are taken to rely heavily on political and legal power. Although, ‘these three understandings can be distinguished for analytical purposes ... empirical processes can be instances of two or three of them’, argues Hall (2013: 1586), explaining in part the somewhat difficult task of separating them in practice. In a similar vein, Adnan (2013) finds the roles of the two as *functionally* similar. Even though primitive accumulation and ABD have been put forward in connection with different historical phases of capitalism, due to which they partly differ in terms of instruments and institutions employed, both work toward subjecting pre- and non-capitalist economies and sectors to the logic of capital.

Following Marx, most scholars have seen primitive accumulation as the historical process of divorcing immediate producers from means of production marking the origins of capitalism in the West. In the more contemporary conditions, it is seen ‘as the crux of transition to capitalism in the Global South’, that is, more broadly, ‘as the means of securing from agriculture the necessary surpluses for industrialization’ (Levien 2011: 455-6). Viewed in this perspective, primitive accumulation is taken to lay out the *preconditions* for capitalist development and expansion. In other words, it ‘both precedes and follows the expansion of capitalist production in historical times’ (Adnan 2013: 95). Whereas, Harvey’s ABD attempts to capture the diversity of dispossessions taking place under fully developed industrial and financial capitalism. The immediate concern here is the survival and expansion of neoliberal capitalism through enclosure and appropriation of the commons or public domain assets by private interests for profit. Greater social inequality is taken to follow from these ‘contemporary class-based processes in which ownership of capital (assets of value) become concentrated (accumulated) in the hands of those already holding capital’ (Fairhead et al. 2012: 243).

The concepts, meanwhile, contain potentially problematic assumptions about land grabbing, ‘including what it is, whether it is a unified phenomenon, who carries it out, and how’ (Hall 2013: 1583), that can lead to misinterpretations of contemporary agrarian change. The danger here is to assume that conditions under which people being dispossessed today live are paralleled by those of

medieval English peasantry (Hall 2013). Arguably, many observers have failed to account for the extent to which land grabbing can be said to ‘expand’ capitalism when (relatively) self-sufficient peasantries and communal lands are assumed rather than shown to exist. In which cases, it remains unclear whether the people and resources in affected areas are straightforwardly ‘outside’ capitalism or not, seemingly waiting to fall prey to capital acting through primitive accumulation or ABD. Similarly, assumptions about land and other resources being ‘grabbed’ are common even when changes in control over and access to land may be more appropriately described as voluntary market transactions (Borras & Franco 2013).

In the absence of (conceptual) clarity as to what ‘is being brought ‘inside’ capitalism, what is not, and how this happens’ (Hall 2013: 1594), it is difficult to make generalised claims about the role of land grabbing in bringing about conditions deemed necessary for the creation and accumulation of capital. The term ‘accumulation’ itself, as broadly conceived, can also be misleading when used in relation to the land grab phenomenon, as it is ‘primarily a process of acquisition rather than accumulation, which may or may not lead to future accumulation, depending on how such assets are incorporated into capitalist production’ (Kenney-Lazar 2012: 1021). Be that as it may, insofar as capitalist expansion takes place in the context of co-existing non-capitalist sectors, it is difficult to consider primitive accumulation as a one-off event as opposed to a continuous process (Adnan 2013). Illustrative of this, Glassman writes:

‘Though primitive accumulation is a process that some have considered a historical phase through which societies pass on the way to more fully proletarianized social structures based on expanded reproduction, the current state of global affairs makes it evident that primitive accumulation has maintained or even increased its salience, meaning either that it is in fact central to capitalist accumulation in general or has a much longer period of historical ‘dissolution’ than previously imagined’ (2006: 621-2).

However, in viewing land grabs as a relatively unified strategy of global capital, inquiries into acts of dispossession are conducted in such a way that ‘largely examines the unjust acquisition of assets without analyzing the resulting transformations of social-property relations’ (Kenney-Lazar 2012: 1021). Moreover, conceiving ABD ‘as a generic response’ to global capitalist crisis is ‘far too abstract to capture the specific political-economic logics driving variations in ABD over space and time’, argues Levien (2011: 457). Not least because there are situations where both land and labour are of interest for investors. On some occasions, as Borras and Franco (2013: 1741) notes, ‘this is a

better bargain for capital in dealing with the problem of the crisis of over-accumulation, to significantly bring down the costs of inputs'.⁴ The substantial analytical and political power of the concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD are thereby at risk of being lost if their specificity becomes dissolved and they are, to all intents and purposes, equated with enclosure and dispossession in general. With this in mind, I proceed to discuss tensions, challenges, and lacunae that I find to inhibit effective use of these concepts in the land grab research.

5.1 Dilemmas of ambiguity and vagueness

Hall (2013: 1583) finds there to be 'substantial tensions and ambiguities over their meanings in the foundational texts by Marx and Harvey' that in turn give rise to multiple readings and ways in which these concepts are deployed. For instance, Moyo et al. (2012: 185) characterise Marx's writing on primitive accumulation 'more descriptive than systematic', while Ince (2014: 114) finds their to be 'dissonance between the conceptual intension and descriptive extension of primitive accumulation'. In similar fashion, Levien (2011: 456) regards Harvey to have failed to put forth a clear definition of ABD – 'he instead includes a list of examples and a few categories of processes'.⁵ The meaning of ABD remains also elusive for Hall (2012: 1193), as it is introduced in *The New Imperialism*, 'in which Harvey does not define it beyond equating it with primitive accumulation'. Levien (2012) traces this 'confusion' back to two central ambiguities in understanding of primitive accumulation that continues to haunt current debates and discussions of ABD, obscuring the theoretical advancements it offers. In essence, the question remains whether we are to define it 'by its *function* to capitalism or by the means *specific* to it' (Levien 2012: 937). As I believe these to be of importance to current debates about land grabbing, they call for some elaboration.

For Levien (2012) then the different views on the relationship between capitalism and the past and ongoing forms of accumulation draw on the two potentially distinct ways of defining Marx's theory of primitive accumulation. That is to say, there remains ambiguity whether it is to be defined by its means, the forces involved turning land and labour into capital, or ultimate function, the creation of

⁴ There is, however, little reason to 'suppose that capitalist would wish to dispose of all formally non-capitalist processes of production and social reproduction (ie, directly commodify everything), since to do so would require capitalists to pay all the costs of reproducing capitalist social relations', as pointed out by Glassman (2006: 617).

⁵ In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey outlines four main processes of dispossession: (1) commodification and privatisation of previously non-marketable assets and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations, (2) financialisation, (3) the management and manipulation of crises on the world stage, and (4) state redistributions (2005: 159-165).

capitalist property and social relations. Similarly, in asking how do we determine what counts as primitive accumulation, Hall (2012) identifies three possible approaches. He argues that:

Some authors highlight the *characteristics* of the process in question, others its *consequences*, and yet others the *intentions* behind it ... [according to the first approach] a process is primitive accumulation if it separates producers from direct access to the means of production, and is not if it does not. Authors taking the second approach ask whether the process is functional to the creation and reproduction of capitalism. Intentional approaches, meanwhile, take an action to be primitive accumulation if it is carried out with the goal of creating or reproducing capitalist social relations (2012: 1195).

In many scholarly accounts on primitive accumulation has come then to denote two transformations. First, ‘the direct expropriation of people’s conditions of production’; and second, ‘the purposeful forcing of people into wage labour’ (Baird 2011: 10), resulting in gradual process of class differentiation. However, mechanisms such as ‘forced commoditization through imposition of money taxes or interlocked debt contracts’ (Adnan 2013: 93) has come to be seen as equally potent ‘levers of primitive accumulation as the extra-economic enclosure of land’ (Levien 2012: 938). To the effect that primitive accumulation for many, has come to be defined by its results, above all proletarianisation, rather than by its extra-economic means. This ambiguity continues to influence the scholarly use of primitive accumulation but also that of the derivative notion of ABD.

Indeed, ABD denotes both a process and strategy by which assets are acquired at little or no costs, new areas of investment are opened, and effective demand increased. While incorporating new mechanisms and institutional arrangements⁶ feeding resources into capitalist accumulation processes – that were not present at Marx’s time, thereby expanding the analytical reach of his notion of primitive accumulation – ABD does not, however, ‘address the transformation of pre-existing production relations at the origin of capitalism, being primarily concerned with the expansion of an *already existing* capitalist sector’ (Adnan 2013: 96). Essentially, Harvey’s ABD seems to refer to accumulation by predation, force or violence. And for many, his reinterpretation of primitive accumulation reads as ‘a continuing process expressed today in the relentless commodification of the world in accordance with the demands of the Washington Consensus’ (Castree & Gregory 2006: 53). In the absence of clear means-specific distinction

⁶ While international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) now regulate global finance and trade, another important difference with the past is that primitive accumulation proceeds today by means of usury, the national debt, the credit system, and suchlike (Harvey 2006: 41-50).

between economic and extra-economic forms of accumulation, ABD is defined unavoidably by its function for global capitalism. That is, to keep global capital accumulation on track. While freeing primitive accumulation from the historicism of modes of production, Harvey reactivates and revives it through more contemporary function, as a means of absorbing over-accumulated capital in the global economy. In other words, ABD is seen as ‘a set of processes that allows global capital to find new outlets’ (Levien 2013: 382). However, if ABD is to be defined as ‘whatever provides an outlet for over-accumulated capital, it is no longer clear what separates it from other ‘spatio-temporal fixes’ and the ordinary operation of capitalist expansion’, notes Levien (2012: 940). Thus, blunting the analytic clarity of the concept.

The missing element, central to analyses of agrarian transformations resulting from land grabbing, is thereby the changing social-property relations central to Marxist understanding of capitalist development. In seeing people dispossessed by land grabs as a surplus population ‘makes dispossession merely a tactic for getting people out of the way’ (Kenney-Lazar 2012: 1033). Thus, the critical transformations associated with primitive accumulation in a given socio-economic context cannot be captured nor explained ‘simply in terms of the needs of capital accumulation on a global scale’, instead ‘they need to be grasped not just in the global context ... but also in their own terms, by reference to domestic economic developments and internal political conflicts’ (Brenner quoted in Adnan 2013: 123). While Harvey’s analysis remains at a high level of abstraction,⁷ answering critical questions in the contemporary land grab research such as ‘[w]ho is getting dispossessed of their access to land and who gets to control these lands’ (Borras & Franco 2013: 1740) calls for substantive empirical analysis. The variations in dispossession across space and time, meanwhile, means that as empirical and historical questions these need to be answered through detailed on the ground research and confronted with comparative and historical evidence, not with problematic assumptions as will be discussed below.

5.2 The problematic assumptions

It is time to address the key guiding questions as to what assumptions do we need to make in order to conceptualise land grabbing as primitive accumulation / ABD? What do we risk missing out on explanation were we to conceptualise land grabbing as such? In answering these questions, I will

⁷ According to Castree (2007: 109), Harvey has studiously avoided addressing ‘the structure-agency problematic where the rich textures of place-based existence were connected with space-making and space-spanning structural forces ... He remains far more comfortable writing about abstract forces than their concrete negotiations by a diversity of place-based human actors’. It should also be noted that Harvey focuses more on political events in within the United States than on the multiple ways in which ABD is implemented across the world (Castree & Gregory 2006: 22).

bring together some earlier statements made to demonstrate how primitive accumulation ‘as an analytic is at once indispensable and problematic’ (Geisler & Makki 2014: 31) in informing the critical scholarship on land grabs. I will make a similar argument concerning the ABD thesis.

Firstly, framing contemporary land grabs in terms of the creation, expansion and reproduction of capitalist social relations encourages the assumptions that people being dispossessed were formerly and straightforwardly outside capitalism. Such functionalist reading of primitive accumulation is often accompanied by a strong tendency to assume that they were autonomous peasants producing for subsistence and / or holding their land in common. There is also a tendency, albeit weaker, to assume that communities in affected areas are internally undifferentiated, and/ or ‘that they have been ‘in place’ since time immemorial’ (Hall 2013: 1597). Excluding thereby the possibility of inequalities existing among their members as well as overlooking the historical relationship between mobility of labour, migrations and land-holding. In essence, the problem with primitive accumulation is that both the conditions under which capitalism can emerge and the process itself are implicitly assumed to be universally the same. In applying primitive accumulation, we risk overlooking the fact that ‘[d]ifferent societies organize and mobilize space in distinctive ways, and the modes of appropriating space necessarily vary across time and cultures’ (Makki 2013: 15).

Secondly, assumptions about actors and preferences prevail. Primitive accumulation is often assumed to be carried out by capital and states, whereas direct producers are against it. ‘While some writers acknowledges that capitalist and states may wish to slow down or prevent the process, there is almost no reference to workers and farmers participating or even welcoming it’ (Hall 2012: 1190).⁸ Moreover, producers engaged in subsistence farming are assumed to avoid markets unless forced to participate in them, and the possibility that they might want to enclose land or to ‘self-dispossess’ by selling it is rarely considered. ‘Enclosure from below’, as Hall (2012) calls it, fits then poorly with assumptions about primitive accumulation. Similarly, peasant farmers eagerness to sell up or participate in contract farming does not support the popular notion of land grabbing as forced evictions and land seizures. This is not to say, however, that primitive accumulation would not often be opposed by rural populations as a violent and wrenching process, but rather to suggest that this is not the whole story. Therefore the term ‘land grab’ should be applied with care to describe in situ processes whereby changes in land use and land property relations take place.

⁸ With respect to Southeast Asia, for example, Hall (2012: 1191) finds these assumptions are at odds with what seems to be the wishes and interest of many rural people.

Indeed, not only are agrarian political economies socially differentiated but they are also fragmented in terms of political reactions among social groups, for the ways in which people will be affected by these processes varies.

Borras and Franco (2013: 1724) thus argues, ‘the individual and collective political reactions of people and peoples affected by land deals cannot be taken for granted’. Although forceful expulsion and subsequent exclusion are taken as integral to the primitive accumulation processes and do not go uncontested, the array of diverse political reactions towards land deals suggests that different processes of dispossession are underway, all of which do not necessarily involve significant extra-economic coercion orchestrated by the state or involvement of transnational capital. It becomes therefore important to look at land grabbing ‘in the context of parallel and overlapping generic land concentration in a region’ (Borras & Franco 2013: 1738). Dispossession by social differentiation is the common mechanism of this concentration. More broadly, there are two basic means by which people lose their land, as explained by Hall:

In the first, people who cannot keep their heads above waters as farmers take on more and more debt and, eventually, have to sell their land to survive. Such ‘economic’ or ‘market’ sales are ‘voluntary’ in the sense that people are not coerced or legally obliged to sell to any particular party or at any particular price. ‘Extra-economic land acquisitions, on the other hand, involve the use of legal or political power and/or (the threat of) force. The people losing land may receive compensation, but there is no market transaction between a willing buyer and a willing seller’ (2013: 1592).

The question then arises can we account for transactions involving the market and non-coercive mechanisms as primitive accumulation? According to Adnan (2013: 94), the key features that define primitive accumulation are ‘the *nature* and *purpose* of the accumulation process, rather than the specific forms and institutional mechanisms involved’. Viewed in this perspective, then, for grabs to count as primitive accumulation lands expropriated need to be deployed in capitalist production. This requires ‘*quantitative* transfer of resources, but also their *qualitative transformation* in terms of property rights’ (Adnan 2013: 92) to take place. Nevertheless, as already noted, not knowing precisely when people and land are moving from the outside to the inside of capitalism, is to be expected (Hall 2012). In the general case, this has to be empirically assessed in a given socio-economic context based on ‘*broad trends* in a *long-term perspective*’ (Adnan 2013: 94). Without such research efforts, the chances are we will define instances of land grab that include not only

capitalist-to-capitalist land deals and leases but also ones failing to bring anything *into* capitalism, as primitive accumulation.

Why does this matter? Problems of conceptual clarity and overlap mean that expansionary dynamic of capitalist development is also framed in terms of concepts like enclosure and commodification. This complicates efforts to understand and explain the major forces driving or impeding agrarian changes. A question well answered by Hall (2012: 1205) in stating: ‘To assume that capital and the state relentlessly push primitive accumulation while “we” resist it will not get one very far; indeed, it may set one off in the wrong direction’. This closely relates to criticism leveled against Harvey’s ABD when used to analyse land grabbing. Although ABD are taken to provide powerful insights into the phenomenon, ‘its assumptions tend to direct attention away from both domestic states and smallholders’ (Hall 2013: 1591). Much of the research frames land grabbing as a response to crisis, and many scholars use ABD, with its focus on capital, states and their strategies, to theorise the process. ‘Such arguments suggests a causal account on the land grab as an expression, ultimately, of the remorseless expansion of capital’, notes Hall (2013: 1595).

Furthermore, in conceptualising land grabs in terms of ABD implies not only that dispossession must take place but also that the dispossessions, too, *must* be massive. Not all land grabs are dispossessory ones, however, even if they may be responses to crisis. Further, in seeing ABD as an economic strategy and process of over-accumulated capital in search for new outlets, the concept’s specificity and utility are undermined. To be sure, ‘narrow readings of commodification, market expansion or accumulation by dispossession may not fully explain the occurrence of land grabs in some circumstances, and their absence in others’ (Sikor quoted in Hall 2013: 1589). In other words, it fails to explain why capital, as broadly defined, resorts to expropriation at any given place and time to sustain accumulation. What is therefore needed is a clear definition of ABD that is not reducible ‘to an unfalsifiable economic claim about its role in global capitalism, and where variation in both terms (the type of accumulation and the mode of dispossession) can be empirically studied and compared, not assumed into the definition’ (Levien 2011: 457). Nevertheless, following Adnan (2013: 123), I argue that new institutional mechanisms of dispossession continue to emerge putting thereby into questions the need for defining ‘a *generic* concept of *capitalism-facilitating accumulation*’. To further elaborate, I turn the discussion back to the nature of capitalism.

5.3 The nature of capitalism

In the beginning, I raised the question what can the analytical concepts of primitive accumulation and ABD give us that other concepts cannot? I argue, that the concepts give us capitalism itself, whereas concepts like enclosure and commodification highlight the market expansion. To be more specific, primitive accumulation and ABD are representative of the continuously changing, evolving relationship between the capitalist and non-capitalist sectors brought together in accumulative processes. As particular instances of modes of production and accumulation they correspond to distinct historical phases of capitalism, yet are subsumable under a generic concept of an ongoing capitalism-facilitating accumulation that applies to the entire trajectory of capitalist development (Adnan 2013). Put differently, as variations in a tendentially singular, relentless process of capitalist development, primitive accumulation and ABD are crucial to our understanding of the specificity and dynamics of capitalism's totality. None of this is to say, however, that the two concepts alone are enough to unpack the diverse contexts and causes of land grabbing. This is because, particular places and peoples are not passively caught up in processes of capitalist ordering and disordering that make and unmake our world. Essentially land grabbing is about geographies that are more complex than the primitive accumulation and ABD frameworks allow them to be.

In order, then, not to miss out on the nuances of capitalist expansion and its contradictions, the emerging literature on land grabbing has brought under scrutiny the dynamics of capital production and accumulation. The classic agrarian question, that is, how agriculture is influenced by capitalism, may be relevant again but contributions to the vast literature on land grabs has been found wanting in this regard (Oya 2013a). While forceful expulsion of peasant populations have received significant attention in the land grab literature, the labour dimension remains under-explored. Edelman et al. (2013), thus, call for more careful and systematic research on labour and forms of subsumption in general, as opposed to displacement, which brings us back to classical debates around primitive accumulation and its variant, ABD. One should not, however, assume that expropriation of land, whether taking place through the market, the state or existing structures of social power and privilege, is sufficient condition for the emergence and expansion of agrarian capitalism. Neither should one equate having titles or formal land rights with tenurial security against expulsion, as discussed above (De Schutter 2011).

While it can, and is, argued that global capitalism possesses a dynamic quality that may be necessary for economic development, the degree to which land grabbing is followed by the two

transformations that make up capitalism as a mode of production and social formation is an empirical question, as already discussed. Research into the dynamics of changes in land use and property relation in the context of land grabbing could benefit, in my opinion, from the analytical framework ‘powers of exclusion’ put forth by Hall (2011:838-9), which focus on the four powers of *regulation, the market, force, and legitimation* as central ‘to the ways in which people, groups, and institutions exclude one another from land ... and the way they gain control over it’.⁹As demonstrated by Kenney-Lazar (2012), primitive accumulation, ABD and powers of exclusion may be combined to build conceptual lenses through which acts of exclusions and dispossession resulting from land grabbing can be analysed. Another way to incorporate details of agrarian transition into the rather abstract theoretical analysis of capitalism, a complimentary of Harvey and Marx, is to follow those who have pushed ahead old debates theoretically, e.g. Adnan (2013) and Levien (2011; 2012; 2013).

To this I would like to add, the tripartite ontological configuration of capitalism, put forth by Rossi (2012). Adopting pluralistically substantive understanding of capitalism itself, would allow us to appreciate capitalism’s different natures of being and ways of relating to its outside environment. Rather than engaging in conceptual debates, we could bring the different views and interpretations together inviting us to questions capitalism’s different processes of subjectification associated with its expansionary impulses. Although the system is fragmented and its processes take unique forms across space and time, there is order among chaos that connects particular and the universal. It is this connection we need to unravel to understand and explain land grabbing in terms of transformations that are constitutive of global capitalist development.

6 | Conclusions

In attempting to analyse the contemporary land grabs within a suitable theoretical framework, scholars have made extensive use of Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation alongside Harvey’s updated version of it under the expanded heading of ABD. The issues relating to social and spatial inequalities in economic development now at its heart, the emerging literature on land grabbing has positively but insufficiently contributed to needed empirical and theoretical specification to the concepts. While some crucial questions regarding actors and their preferences or spatially and

⁹ The framework was developed in *Powers of Exclusion: Land Dilemmas in Southeast Asia* (Hall et al. 2011).

socially uneven and differentiated impacts of land grabs, arguably, overlooked or unsatisfactorily addressed by these concepts, the substantial analytical and political power they hold is not to be disregarded. I argue that primitive accumulation and ABD, compared to other concepts employed in the land grab research, gives us the immensely dynamic and creative capitalism itself, but can only go so far in terms of explaining the impacts and outcomes of land grabbing. This means that other analytical concepts must be employed to explain the empirics of the phenomenon.

In order to move beyond the conceptual debate, I propose revising the notion of capitalism as a relentlessly expanding totality of social relations. Defining capitalism not only as mode of production but also as a social formation would make it easier to understand and explain the system's contradictions and crisis-tendencies. In this perspective, primitive accumulation and ABD can be read as variations in a tendentially singular, relentless process of capitalist development. This would be, in my opinion, a better option than attempting to define a generic concept of capitalism-facilitating accumulation. Furthermore, I propose wider engagement in theoretical pluralism to better explain the geographic particularities and contextual specificities of variegated capitalism. In combining the different understandings of the ways in which capitalism relates to its outside environment, come into being, and expand further would offer us a better appreciation of its peculiar economic nature that leaves behind distinct places and uneven spaces.

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